

## Beargrass Days

Beargrass Festival, later called Beargrass Days, was created in 1986 to stimulate park visitation during the slowest part of the summer, the period between mid-August and Labour Day. For 12 seasons, Beargrass Days drew visitors to the park from both Alberta and Montana becoming a highly successful tourist magnet.<sup>1</sup>

There was literally something for everyone from children to young adults to their parents and grandparents and most events were free of charge. In the beginning the events ranged from a street parade, featuring First Nations people in traditional dress, a marching band, clowns, horses, and floats, to a windsurfing competition, scuba diving, golf and tennis tournaments, a comedy night, pancake breakfast, afternoon chilli cook off, First Nations drumming and dancing, an old-time fiddler's contest, a canoe race, kite flying demonstrations and competition, water skiing demonstration and the Beargrass Boogie, a dance held in the Lions Hall.

Every year the lineup was changed to appeal to visitors. From the outset, the event was a success primarily because of its variety.<sup>2</sup> Two Waterton business women were the prime movers of the event, Leslie Muza and Edith Becker. Within a few seasons, Muza and



*Parade floats were brought in by many groups to participate in Waterton. (Photo: Leslie Muza)*



*Vehicles of all kinds were part of the Beargrass Days parade. (Photo: Leslie Muza)*

Becker registered the Beargrass Society as a non-profit association to ensure there was accountability for donations and sponsorships from corporations and Travel Alberta and Chinook Country Tourist Association.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the organizers encouraged volunteers from the community to take an active role in the orchestration of the event. Included were Josie Meech, Cathy Morrison, Marty Lewis and many others. They worked with enthusiasm, some even seeking donations or sponsorships from their own employers outside the park.<sup>4</sup>

Parks Canada, while not into marketing the park as they would later become, helped out to the extent possible by granting permission for the parade through town and ensuring public safety during the parade. The Chamber of Commerce was not able to help with financing the event at the time but individual members actively assisted where possible, even while occupied in running their own business. Parade participation was exceptionally good from regional tourist facilities which sent in floats and individuals when possible.<sup>5</sup>

The work of the community volunteers was repaid in personal satisfaction. Beargrass Days worked because of it, something the post-event evaluators all agreed upon. At the time, one of the key measures of success was an increase in park visitation and organizers were quick to note what did and didn't work and make changes the following season if necessary.<sup>6</sup> Over its course Beargrass Days shrank from a week of events to a weekend of events, shortening as time went by.



*Area First Nations members were a special attraction both in the parade and at dedicated cultural events. (Photo: Leslie Muza)*

According to Beth Towe, who participated in the marketing of the event, “The years 1986-1997 were the start of the Golden Age of Tourism in which marketing of tourism was encouraged by the provincial government and by regional tourism organizations. The financial contribution of tourism was seen as an important “industry”. In hindsight, Towe said, the timing was perfect and it all came together at once: provincial government support for community-based tourism, planning, funding and support to distribute visitation to local attractions. Encouragement was there for the Waterton project and it worked with help from both

businesses and the community. “We’re still riding the wave of all that work,” Towe said in late 2015, nearly two decades after Beargrass Days ended.<sup>7</sup>

Two circumstances brought about the end of Beargrass Days after 1997. One was the realization that Beargrass Society directors were personally financially liable in the event of an untoward incident such as a participant or spectator injury. The other was the removal of the spacious swimming pool parking lot in the centre of the townsite where many events took place.<sup>8</sup> Despite all the work it required by its many volunteers and organizers, Beargrass was a memorable annual event. Society director Leslie Muza, then co-owner of the Kilmorey Lodge and other motels in Waterton, looked back fondly on those 12 years. “I miss it,” she said.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Beargrass Days ended with the close of the 1997 event.

<sup>2</sup> "Beargrass Days End," *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 26, 1986, 3. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 13.

<sup>3</sup> Interview by Chris Morrison with Beth Russell-Towe, Oct. 22, 2015, WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 13.

<sup>4</sup> Interview by Chris Morrison with Leslie Muza, Oct. 23, 2015, WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 13.

<sup>5</sup> Interview, Beth Towe.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, Leslie Muza.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, Beth Towe.

<sup>8</sup> The land on which the parking lot and swimming pool were located was re-leased for construction of a new accommodate first named The Lodge at Waterton Lakes. The work began on the facility in the fall of 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Interview, Leslie Muza.